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The role of the imagination in Virginia Woolf's short fiction

Elke D'hoker

1 The early decades of the twentieth century, the period in which Virginia Woolf started writing her short fiction, have often been called the heydays of the British short story. Only in the 1880's had the British short story come into its own, and in the subsequent decades, writing short fiction became a fashionable and even fairly lucrative pursuit. As several critics have noted, the early twentieth century was also marked by a "wave of experimentalism in British short fiction" (Benzel and Hoberman 3) and Woolf's short stories have often been read in terms of these narrative experiments. Because of the development of mass readership and the changed context of publishing, authorship too underwent significant changes around the turn of the century and, with the advent of modernism, so did the conception of literature and art. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the short story provided a suitable medium for reflection on the changing nature of art and the artist (Maunders x). While these themes are perhaps most famously explored in the short fiction of Henry James and James Joyce, several of Woolf's short stories too stage meta-fictional concerns. Indirect evidence of the theoretical preoccupations in some of Woolf's short stories can be found in the way critics have often interpreted these stories in the context of her essays (cf. Baldwin 21f., Head 81f.). Moreover, as Susan Dick notes in her introduction to Woolf's collected shorter fiction, "the line separating Virginia Woolf's fiction from her essays is a very fine one" (2) and stories such as "Memoirs of Novelist" or "Three Pictures" cross the boundaries between essay, sketch and story.

2 In this essay I propose to investigate in more detail the meta-fictional properties of a handful of Woolf's short stories, focusing in particular on their exploration of the role and function of imagination. In the short stories as in the essays the imagination is a key term in Woolf's aesthetics. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", Woolf claims defiantly that a character should be a product not "of freehold villas and copyhold estates", but rather "of imagination" (1968: 333). In "The Art of Biography" it is the artistic imagination which

ultimately separates biography from art proper (1967: 225f.) and in "Modern Fiction" the "creative power" of the imagination is a crucial factor in the attempt to forge a more truthful representation of "life itself" (1966: 107-8). On the other hand, short stories which foreground, question or dramatize the role of the imagination in both art and life can be found throughout Woolf's career: from "Memoirs of a novelist" and "The Mark on the Wall" over "Sympathy" and "An Unwritten Novel" to "Moments of Being", "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" and "Three Pictures".

3 In the existing criticism of Woolf's short fiction her staging of the problem of the imagination is often read in terms of the irresolvable tension between binary opposites. Thus Joanne Trautman Banks calls central to Woolf's aesthetics such oppositions as "art and life, appearance and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, the self and the not-self, vision and fact" (18) and in an insightful discussion of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass", Julia Briggs similarly detects a "series of binary opposites: life and art; room and garden; inside and outside; words and pictures; imagination and reality; change and stillness; light and shadow" (176). While the tension between the two poles in these oppositions is of course ultimately irresolvable, I will nevertheless try to pin down Woolf's position with regard to the imagination in a somewhat more precise way. What part of the binaries does Woolf privilege in her stories: reality or the imagination, the self or the other, art or life? What does Woolf's short fiction reveal about the power and the limits of the imaginative faculty? What does it tell us about the methods and tools the artistic imagination wields? And what is the ethical dimension of the sympathetic imagination as Woolf sees it? These are some of the questions which I will hope to answer in this essay.

Imagination as the artist's tool

4 One of the first stories in which the issue of the imagination is centrally addressed is "Memoirs of a Novelist". It is one of Woolf's so-called early stories which combine several different genres: "nineteenth-century biography, the journal, the essay, and the review" (Snaith 127). In this short work, the unnamed narrator comically criticises Miss Linsett's biography of the (fictional) Victorian lady novelist Miss Willatt. This biography, the narrator argues, sadly fails to bring its subject to life due to a mixture of "nervous prudery", "dreary literary conventions" (Woolf 2003: 67) and, as Dean Baldwin has put it, "a failure of imagination" (11). Exasperated by the excess of useless circumstantial fact in the biography and by the lack of true insight in Miss Willatt's personality, the narrator then sets about providing an alternative biography, one geared towards the inner consciousness of both the novelist and her biographer. On the basis of tiny but telling remarks in letters and novels, the narrator imagines an inner life for Miss Willatt which gives the lie to the blameless stone effigy Miss Linsett fashioned for her. Though her speculations are at first quite modestly introduced by small phrases such as "(if we may theorise)" (63), "we can imagine" (65), "we can only guess" (66) or "one believes" (67), they quickly give way to bold statements about the characters' 'true' motivations, regrets, secret hopes and dreams. In this way, the narrator does succeed where Miss Linsett failed: Miss Willatt becomes a 'real' person whose inner life is convincingly illuminated. "Memoirs of a Novelist" thus offers – in part – a plea for the imagination as the artist's tool needed to truly express "the spirit we live by, life itself", as Woolf put it in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1968: 337).

5 A similar celebration of the imagination can be found in "The Mark on the Wall", though the imagination is here directed towards an object rather than a person. That the lengthy imaginative speculations which the narrator engages in upon seeing a mark on the wall, are ultimately proven wrong is largely irrelevant: a mere fact which interrupts the far more fascinating work of the imagination. Interestingly, both "Memoirs of a Novelist" and "The Mark on the Wall" refer in a small remark to one of the driving forces behind Woolf's fiction: the curiosity about other human beings. In the first story, the narrator wistfully talks about "all these people" who "come to life again" and "tempt us intolerably to know more about them" (72). And even though the facts of their lives are "irrecoverably" lost, their personality can be revived in fiction. In "The Mark on the Wall", on the other hand, the narrator first introduces a motif which will be explored again and again in Woolf's short fiction, that of the people who "face each other in omnibuses and underground railways" who inspire the artist with an insatiable curiosity as to the lives lived behind the "mirror" (79).

6 This motif is explored in greater detail in the well-known essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" where Woolf calls this curiosity the central driving force of her writing. She explains how, for her, a novel seems to originate in "the figure of a man, or of a woman, who said 'My name is Brown. Catch me if you can" (1968: 319). Woolf then further explores the idea of a nameless woman in a train carriage whose very expression invites the observer/narrator to imagine a life for her. Since the essay is centrally concerned with the opposition between the obsolete and ineffective "Edwardian" conventions for writing and the quest of the "Georgian" writers for new forms and fictions, the imagined life of Mrs. Brown takes the form not of a series of material details but of little scenes in which the narrator "sees the person ... sees Mrs. Brown" (322). What is important to Woolf here, as in "Memoirs of a Novelist" and "The Mark on the Wall", are not the facts of a life, but the artist's "vision" of a life – and, by extension, of "life" in general (325). And the imagination has a central role to play in the creation of this vision.

7 The artistic attempt to imaginatively perceive the inner life of other human beings also inspires three other short stories in Woolf's oeuvre: "An Unwritten Novel", "Moments of Beings: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection". Dominic Head calls these three stories the "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown stories" (81), because they are driven by the same 'catch-me-if-you-can-demon' which Woolf explores in the essay of that title. Characteristic of all three stories, moreover, is that the imaginative quest for the "true" personality of the character is at the end of the story checked--and reverse--by the "facts" of reality. The stories all end with an alternative scene which may--or may not--be more accurate than the first one. In all three stories, in other words, the imagination comes up against its own limits. Yet a careful reading of the stories shows that the limits of the imagination are already evident within the richness of the narrator's initial visions, suggesting a failure or lack at the heart of the imaginative faculty itself. In spite of the obvious similarities between all three stories, moreover, each story spells out the limitations of the imagination in a slightly different way. In what follows, therefore, I will discuss each of the Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown stories in terms of a different failing of the imagination, even though cross-references will also make the links between them apparent.

The limits of the imagination

8 The setting of "An Unwritten Novel" most closely resembles the anecdote of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" as the narrator finds herself challenged into storytelling by the "expression of unhappiness" on a woman's face in a railway carriage (106). She then sets out to "read" that expression, to "see" the life behind it. It is indeed the very "life, soul, spirit" (111) of "Minnie Marsh" which the narrator is interested in and both reading and perceiving are foregrounded as activities in her attempt to imaginatively capture that life. "I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze", the narrator claims (108). And frequently she describes scenes as though literally "seeing" them. The narrator thus imagines for Minnie Marsh a contemptuous sister-in-law she is going to visit, an unspecified crime she committed in the past, an ailing mother she nursed faithfully for many years and a lurid travelling salesman she has to confront at her brother's house. Even though the narrator claims that all this unhappiness is "life's fault. Life imposes her laws; life blocks the way" (112), to the reader it is much more the conventions of sentimental fiction which seem to determine Minnie's life. Indeed, as Dean Baldwin has noted, the narrator's "deciphering takes the form of clichés from popular fiction" (22). Far from being original and true, in other words, the narrator's imagination is heavily determined by existing literary stereotypes and conventions. This is finally confirmed by the sudden appearance of the woman's son which disproves the narrator's entire story, ironically at the exact point when she claims "I've read you right – I'm with you now" (115). In "Three Pictures", one of Woolf's later stories, this tendency of the imagination to be bound and determined by preconceived ideas and stereotypes is explicitly commented on: "[I]t is impossible that one should not see pictures [...] We can not possibly break out of the frame of the picture by speaking natural words" (222). If these pictures take an explicitly social form in that story – "if my father was a blacksmith and yours was a peer of the realm, we must needs be pictures to each other" (222), in "An Unwritten Novel", the far more general nature of these pictures and stereotypes is demonstrated. They inevitably shape our interpretation, our 'reading', of other people, thus effectively curbing the powers and possibilities of the imagination.

9 "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" is another story about the imaginative 'reading' of another person. The exercise is brought about here not by an unhappy look, but by an unexpected remark. Miss Craye's remark about Slater's pins brings home to her pupil, Fanny Wilmot, the realisation that her piano teacher has an ordinary life too. This leads her to an imaginative (re-)construction of that life on the basis of a few stray facts and remarks. "Around these", as Baldwin has put it, "Miss Wilmot spins imaginary incidents of courtship and proposals spurned, and of a life given meaning by Miss Craye's battles against the headaches that have plagued her for years" (53). A closer look at the text reveals some of the workings of Fanny's imagination as she effectively reads significance *into* some remarks of Miss Craye, ever so slightly altering them in the process. Thus a remark of Miss Craye about men – "It's the use of men, surely, to protect us" – is recalled in three different ways. In the first recording, Miss Craye says it "smilingly" (211). Subsequently, Fanny meaningfully changes the remark into "It was the *only* use of men, she had said" (211, italics mine) and in the final instance, Miss Craye delivers the remark "with a queer, wry acerbity" (211). In a similar way, another of Miss Craye's remarks about men – "they're ogres" – is first recounted as being said "half

laughing" and later on as "laughing grimly" (213). One could indeed, as Fanny notes elsewhere, "make that yield what one liked" (212).

10 These and other half-deliberate misreadings betray Fanny's strong personal investment in the scenes she imagines for Miss Craye. Several other details further confirm this impression. When Fanny imagines Miss Craye's desire "to break the pane of glass which separated them from other people" (210), this reflects in fact her own desire to break through the reserved front of her piano teacher and to penetrate the person behind it. Similarly, Fanny's reading of Julia Craye as a strong, independent woman who turns down a suitor so as not to "sacrifice" her freedom (212-13) recalls Fanny's earlier remark that she doesn't "want protection [from men]" (211). Finally, the mixture of desire and frustration, of wanting and not getting it which Fanny ascribes to Miss Craye might again simply be a projection of her own half-conscious longings. This is also the conclusion which Annette Oxindine reaches in her reading of the lesbian dimension of this story. "Suspecting Julia's lesbianism," she argues, "Fanny is able to project onto her teacher all the frustration and desire she has been unable to acknowledge as her own" (54).[1] For Oxindine, the story is thus much more about "Fanny's discovery of her own sexual feelings for another woman", than about Julia Craye's own lesbianism (54).

11 To return to the question of the imagination, it is clear that the inner life which Fanny fashions for Julia Craye is very much determined by her own thoughts and feelings. The imagination is thus again shown in its limitations, bound as it is by the personality of the one who imagines. In fact, the narrative set-up of "Moments of Being" lends itself particularly well to the exploration of the subjectivity of the imagination. Unlike "An Unwritten Novel" and "The Lady in the Looking Glass", this story is narrated by an omniscient narrator who focalises through Fanny and is thus able to reveal more of the personality of the creator than is possible in the first-person narratives. Moreover, the omniscient narrator takes over at crucial moments, for instance to mark the final surprise reversal which – as in "An Unwritten Novel" – further confirms the inevitable imperfections of the imagination.

12 "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" is the last of Woolf's stories centrally concerned with the possibility of truly knowing another human being. In this story, the 'other' is no (half) stranger, but an intimate friend of the narrator. The narrator is left alone in the drawing room while her friend, Isabella Tyson, has gone out in the garden to cut flowers. As the narrator is pondering the strange opposition between the reality around her and the life reflected in the large mirror hanging in the hall, she comes to realise how little she really knows about her friend: "it was strange that after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was" (216). There are some facts, but no real knowledge of Isabella's inner being: "[i]t was absurd, it was monstrous. If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand – the imagination" (217). The narrator then starts a rich train of speculations about Isabella's innermost thoughts about life and death, happiness and regret. She also fancifully compares Isabella to the elegant, fantastic flowers she is cutting and she likens Isabella's thoughts to the dancing light in the drawing room. Yet the narrator realises at the same time that the metaphors will not do, "for they come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one's eyes and the truth" (216). As in the other stories, the speculations are finally proven void when, in a final reversal, Isabella is revealed to be "perfectly empty" and to have "no thoughts" at all (219). If this is the truth – and I will

come back to that question later on – it is a rather negative kind of truth which does not reveal much about Isabella's inner self either.

13 The story thus addresses the fundamental difficulty of ever fully knowing the intimate self or inner life of another human being. Isabella cannot wholly be known through fancy or metaphor – and perhaps not even through art. Once again, the imagination comes up against its limits here. This is also suggested in the story "Sympathy" where the narrator's imagination is stirred upon reading the death-notice of her friend's husband in the morning paper. She claims to "see" the death-bed, the widow's grief and even the dead man himself. Yet she stops short of imagining her friend's first, crucial confrontation with her dead husband: "There is a moment I can't fancy: the moment in other people's lives that one always leaves out; the moment from which all that we know them by proceeds; I follow her to his door; I see her turn the handle, then comes the blind moment and when my fancy opens its eyes again I find her equipped for the world – a widow" (102). These stories thus draw out a third failing of the imagination: its inability to penetrate the innermost self of another human being.

Art and the Imagination

14 The three stories discussed here seem to have a similar outline: a train of speculative thought about another person is cut short by a final reversal. Dean Baldwin, however, traces a crucial difference between them, when he discusses the closing scene of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" as follows:

> We have here the only story in which the narrator is able to pierce the barrier of external reality and discover something essential about her subject. Why is this narrator able to succeed where Fanny Wilmot and the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel" were not? The answer is the mirror, for it does more than reflect; it also composes and holds. (56)

15 In order to assess this difference between the stories, it is necessary to further investigate the final paragraphs of all three stories, which describe the famous reversal scene in which the imaginative speculations of the narrator or focaliser are proven wrong. In "An Unwritten Novel", the narrator watches aghast as "her" Minnie walks away with her loving son. At the same time, this scene "floods her anew", and to an even greater degree as she jubilantly embraces her mysterious fellow creatures: "If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me – adorable world!" (115).

16 Another, more literal, embrace can be found in "Moments of Being" when an ecstatic Miss Craye disproves Fanny's speculations about loneliness and suddenly embraces her pupil. Again, this leads Fanny to experience a sudden vision in which "[A]ll seemed transparent for a moment" and she really *sees* Julia. The word "saw" effectively becomes a mantra in the final paragraphs; it is repeated no less than ten times: "She saw Julia open her arms; saw her blaze; saw her kindle. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star" (214). In "The Lady in the Looking-Glass", finally, the narrator similarly *sees* Isabella at last, but this time as a reflection in the mirror: "At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle" (219). When considering these final scenes, the inevitable question is of course whether

the "truth" has indeed been grasped: whether the inner self of M.M., Julia and Isabella has actually been penetrated and their life or soul finally been revealed.

17 First, it should be evident that the mere placing of these scenes at the end of the stories ensures that they cannot in turn be contradicted. The story closes on this revelatory moment and thus precludes dissent. It is important to note, moreover, that the "truth" is in all three cases arrived at in a brief, sudden and heightened moment of revelation. The endings are all "moments of being", to use Woolf's terminology, but also--and perhaps even more so--moments of *seeing*: Joycean epiphanies, yielding a special insight or a newly-discovered significance. As in the Joycean epiphany, moreover, ordinary reality is transcended in these moments and the moment achieves the perfection and timelessness of art. In "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" this artistic transformation is made explicit through the image of the mirror, but in the other stories too, the revelatory moment transforms reality into art. As a result, the referential aspect has ceased to matter.[2] It has become irrelevant whether M.M. or Julia are really happy, or whether it is at all possible for a person to be so empty of thoughts. With art's fixing, composing and transcending gestures, another truth has taken over – a truth which replaces the potentiality of the imagination with the timeless intensity of achieved art.

Ethics and the imagination

18 Yet art is, in fact, but a partial concern of these stories. It is only in the final paragraphs of each story that a momentary vision achieves the transcendent quality of art. The rest of the stories is very much set in ordinary reality and is concerned with the reading of and dealing with other people in everyday life. The evident importance of the imagination in these interpersonal activities leads one to wonder about the ethical dimension of the imagination in Woolf's short fiction. Surprisingly, however, this topic has so far received but little attention on the part of Woolf critics. In a fairly complex difficult philosophical discussion of "it" in Woolf's short fictions, Anne Besnault-Levita does explore what she calls "the ethics of Virginia Woolf's poetics of the implicit" (135) and in her essay on Woolf's short fiction, Joanne Trautman Banks argues cryptically that "Woolf investigates the imagination as a tool for knowing, unifying, and finally transcending its environment through love" (18). Yet, on the whole, the ethical or moral dimension of Woolf's short stories has not really been a well-researched topic in the existing criticism, due perhaps to the virtual absence of explicit references to ethics or morality in the stories themselves. Nevertheless, I believe that the contemporary theoretical debate about ethical criticism or the ethics of reading can shed some further light on the role of the imagination in Woolf's short stories.

19 If we consider the ethical value of the imaginative faculty in Woolf's stories, a first thing that becomes evident is that the imagination is, on the whole, a positive force. It speaks of a genuine interest in other people which is opposed to the deadening interest in the "material" of Mr. Bennett and his fellow novelists (Woolf 1966: 104-5).[3] In several stories, secondly, the imagination is revealed to be a sympathetic imagination, which allows for a fellow-feeling, an embracing of a shared humanity. Thirdly, a few stories also show how the sympathetic imagination works through identification. In the "The Lady in the Looking-Glass", for instance, the narrator – resolved to truly know Isabella – decides "[o]ne must put oneself in her shoes" (218). And in "An Unwritten Novel", the narrator

identifies with the suffering of the poor woman opposite to such an extent that she takes over the woman's habits of twitching and rubbing the glass:

> Something impelled me to take my glove and rub my window. There, too, was a little speck on the glass. For all my rubbing it remained. And then the spasm went through me; I crooked my arm and plucked at the middle of my back. My skin, too, felt like the damp chicken's skin in the poulterer's shop-window [...] Leaning back in my corner, shielding my eyes from her eyes, seeing only the slopes and hollows, greys and purples, of the winter's landscape, I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze. (107-8)

20 The ethical or moral qualities which Woolf thus seems to attribute to the imagination correspond with Martha Nussbaum's take on the sympathetic imagination.[4] In books such as *Love's Knowledge* (1990) and *Poetic Justice* (1990) Nussbaum offers an extended plea for the value of the narrative imagination in ethical behaviour. In the essay "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", she further defends these claims against a number of opponents. There she argues again for the powerful moral force the imagination presents, both because of its "cognitive role" "in bringing us into contact with the complexity of our own lives and the lives of others" (348) and because of its compassionate dimension, which allows us to emotionally share the plight of our fellow human beings (349). Literature is for Nussbaum a prime way for exercising this moral imagination, precisely because it allows for identification, as it "take[s] us into the lives of those who are different in circumstance from ourselves and enable[s] us to understand. While it will be clear from the foregoing that Woolf shares some of Nussbaum's faith in the powers of the imagination, there are other signs in the stories which indicate a greater wariness of the imagination as well as a comical undercutting of the moral powers which Nussbaum takes so seriously.

21 It is hard, for instance, to ignore the irony in the 'rubbing-and-twitching fragment' from "An Unwritten Novel" quoted before. The narrator's excessive identification with her fellow passenger is clearly mocked and so are, as I have argued, the highly clichéd scenes she imagines for her. In the story "Sympathy" too, the capacity of the sympathetic imagination to inspire compassion for other people is questioned. The narrator seems to spend all her sympathy in imagining elaborate scenes of mourning for her friend Celia, so that at the end of her daydreaming, she has no feelings left: "It seems to me that he has been dead for weeks, for years; when I think of him I see scarcely anything of him, and that saying about his of liking furniture means nothing at all. And yet he died; the utmost he could do gives me now scarcely any sensation at all. Terrible! Terrible! to be so callous!" (105). When the narrator subsequently finds out that it was Celia's father-in-law who died, not her husband, she even exclaims "O don't tell me he lives still! O why did you deceive me?" (105). The sympathetic imagination is here treated with a good dose of irony and its results are clearly not conducive to what Nussbaum would call "moral behaviour".

22 The limitations of the imagination which Woolf highlights in the three Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown stories – its reliance on set patterns and clichés, its subjectivity and its inability to penetrate the inner core of the other – of course further detract from the positive, moral force which Nussbaum claims for it. If the imagination offers only a biased reading or a partial understanding of the other, it may not present a sound base for a caring and responsible relationship at all. In "The Lady in the Looking-Glass", moreover, Woolf goes even further. Here, the very act of reading – a positive force in the other stories – is rendered in much more ambiguous terms. We have seen how the narrator,

dismayed at the realisation that her friend Isabella may have "concealed so much", is determined to "prize her open", to "fix [her] mind upon her", "to fasten her down" (217). Similarly, she wants to "catch" Isabella's inner self, to "penetrate a little farther into her being" (218). These words are all suggestive of the violence inherent in the act of reading or knowing the other, as he or she is likely to be defined, placed or "caught" in categories or clichés. After all, as Woolf put it in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", aren't we all "uncomfortable [...] at travelling with fellow passengers unless [we] have somehow or other accounted for them?" (1968: 322).

Imagination and alterity

23 The critique of the imagination implicit in this use of terms brings Woolf's conception of the imagination closer to the poststructuralist take on ethics and reading. In his essay "Violence et Métaphysique", Jacques Derrida follows Emmanuel Levinas in his criticism of Western (moral) philosophy as "egology", because it invariably tries to reduce the other to the same. As Levinas points out, "[t]o possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power" and when the other is thus "possessed, seized, and known", it is no longer other (qtd. Derrida 91). This reduction of the "other" to the "same"--with its familiar categories, clichés and norms – is something the sympathetic imagination is also guilty of. We have seen how Woolf shows this in "Moments of Being" where Fanny projects her own desires on Julia Craye and in "An Unwritten Novel" where the narrator reduces the strange woman sitting across from her to a character she knows from popular fiction. While Nussbaum explicitly defends the compassionate imagination for making us realise how "*different*" people have after all but "*similar* hopes and fears" (349, my italics), Woolf is clearly much more ambivalent about this reductive quality of the imagination.

24 As an alternative to Western 'egology', Levinas proposes an asymmetrical ethical encounter in which the self is placed under a radical imperative by the Other. Levinas' strictly philosophical ethics of alterity, to which I cannot do full justice here, have been elaborated in more pragmatic terms by several literary theorists, who have also applied it to literature. Derek Attridge, for instance, takes up a clear position against Nussbaum when he argues:

> It is in the acknowledgement of the other human being's uniqueness and therefore of the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for him or her that one can be said to encounter the other. At the same time as it is an affirmation of the other as other, therefore, the experience is an encounter with the limits of one's powers to think and to judge, a challenge to one's capacities as a rational agent. (24)

25 I would argue that Woolf's short stories realise some of this "impossibility" or translate some of this "challenge" in the difficulties and obstacles the imagination encounters in its attempt to read other people. Each in its own way, the Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown stories show how the imagination is always trying *and* failing to fully understand the other. While the stories approve of the curiosity which makes one want to meet the challenge posed by the other's otherness, they also show that that challenge can never fully be met. The hesitations, limitations and, finally, reversals of the narrative imagination in Woolf's stories thus bear witness to what Attridge called, "the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for [the other]". While the attempts to 'read' the other are in themselves laudable, even ethical, they are also doomed to fail.

26 Yet for Woolf, they fail in reality--not necessarily in art. In the revelatory moment at the end of each story, in fact, Woolf seems to reaffirm her faith in the ability of art to temporarily fix or frame the other, or--to put it in more positive terms--to bring the other to life. Even if the truth reached in these epiphanies is no longer a referential truth, but the timeless truth of art, the endings of all three stories offer a powerful epiphany which seems to reassert the truth of the imagination against the limitations first revealed. In this, I would argue, Woolf essentially differs from thinkers like Attridge or Derrida. Woolf's faith in the power of artistic imagination to reveal the truth of (a) life, even if only momentarily, is a characteristically modernist belief. Attridge's postmodern theories, on the contrary, are far more sceptical as they highlight the *fundamental* limitations of art, knowledge and the imagination. This difference can also be illustrated by means of a passage from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in which Woolf begs her audience's tolerance for "the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure" of modern art (1968: 337). For, she argues, this "exhausted and chaotic condition" (335) is only temporary: it is due to the modern writers' attempts to break free from their predecessors. Be patient, be supportive, she urges her readers, because unity and truth will in the end break through, as "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature" (337). If for the postmodernists "the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure" would be fitting emanations of the intrinsic limits of the artistic and sympathetic imaginations, for Woolf these failures and limits are a reality made bearable by the promise that they can be overcome. It is this duality, finally, which Woolf's metafictional short stories admirably capture as the hesitant and searching meanderings of the narrative imagination are – finally, but temporarily – suspended by the promise of wholeness, fixity and stability of art.

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NOTES

1. Oxindine even goes so far as to read Miss Craye's kiss at the end as a projection of Fanny, but I am not fully convinced by the textual evidence she gives in support of that interpretation (51). I will come back to that final scene later on in this essay.

2. In an interesting article on Woolf's theory of the short story, Christine Reynier similarly argues how "honesty" in Woolf's theory of fiction does no longer involve "true-to-life details and the creation of 'the illusion of reality'", but rather "inconclusiveness", "freedom" and "emotional intensity" (60-61).

3. In "Modern Fiction" Woolf also praises the Russian writers specifically for their "sympathy for the sufferings of others" (1966: 109).

4. I am taking Martha Nussbaum here as an example of a larger strand in ethical criticism, often called "neo-humanist" or "hermeneutic" criticism (see Harpham 1f.). Richard Rorty and Alisdair MacIntyre are also representatives of this tradition.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article étudie la fonction, le pouvoir et la dimension éthique de l'imagination dans quelques nouvelles de Woolf écrites à différents moments de sa carrière. Il montre que si certaines nouvelles—et certains essais—de Woolf présentent l'imagination comme une force positive dans le renouvellement de l'art, d'autres soulignent les limites de l'imagination—son recours à des formes fixes et des clichés, sa subjectivité et son incapacité à pénétrer au cœur de l'autre. En se plaçant dans une perspective éthique, cet article tente ensuite de cerner la façon dont Woolf aborde l'imagination et de situer l'auteur dans le débat critique contemporain sur l'éthique et la littérature. Bien que Woolf, comme, d'une certaine manière, Martha Nussbaum, croie au pouvoir moral de l'imagination narrative, par sa conscience de la violence potentielle et des limites de l'imagination, elle se rapproche de la conception post-structuraliste de la critique éthique qu'ont des penseurs tels que Jacques Derrida et Derek Attridge. Enfin, cet article s'interroge sur l'opposition entre l'art et la réalité dans les nouvelles de Woolf consacrées à l'imagination et conclut que, parce que Woolf continue à croire au pouvoir imaginatif de l'art, son éthique et son esthétique modernistes ne coïncident pas avec le projet post-moderne de Derrida et Attridge.

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